

“The Tie That Binds”

Sermon – September 6, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

Churches are full of troublesome people. Oh, I’m sure not *you*. It’s, y’know, those *other* people. In fact, arguably the principal cause of strife and discord in our world is, well, “people.”

And it’s “people” who make up the “church.” In today’s gospel lesson from Matthew 18:15-20 we hear about the “church” but the Greek word is *ekklésia*, which in the context of Jesus’ time would probably be better translated as “assembly”, more how today’s Quakers—the Religious Society of Friends—meet: relatively small groups in people’s homes.

The *ekklésia*, the “church” was the body of believers bound by faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ. After all, the “church”, as we think of it today, was not born until the resurrection inaugurated its mission in the world and then evolved dramatically over the decades and centuries.

Jesus reminds the faithful of the great power they wield as a gift from God.

As the “philosopher” Stan Lee penned in the narrative caption of the last panel in the 1962 Amazing Fantasy comic book #15 that introduced Spider-Man for the first time: with great power comes great responsibility.

In short, the steps Jesus lays out here are not a mere set of instructions so much as a statement of communal values and an acknowledgment of both the frailty as well as the utter necessity of communal discernment. Love requires that we address the inevitable conflicts that will arise among us.

Jesus’ message in today’s passage can be summarized in one word:

reconcile. That is, restore broken relationships. Seek every possible way of making peace. Don't give up.

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If a fellow believer sins against you, has personally wronged, offended, or harmed you, your goal is to reconcile. To do so, you personally, but privately, go to offender and try to work it out. This is probably the number one thing people in conflict do **not** do. They talk to their friends, they complain to the boss, they do everything except directly engage the person who offended them.

I’m not talking about threats of life or physical abuse but the every day things we all run across. The shortest distance between you and an offender is direct engagement. And for both parties to **listen**.

Listening is hard. For many people, it is easier to identify the ways they have been harmed than it is to recognize the ways their actions can harm others, even if unintentionally.

Thus, truly try to understand where the other person is coming from. Don’t treat the offender with contempt. Treat them with compassion and a hope that fellowship can be restored.

If that doesn’t work, bring a couple of other people along. Not to take sides, not to judge, but to help facilitate understanding and healing. The health and welfare of the community are part and parcel of the problem of sin between two of the community’s individual parts.

If that doesn’t work, then go to the “church.” Go to the assembly of believers recognizing that those of us who are bound together as the Body of Christ serve a God whose will is that not even little ones should be lost.

If that doesn’t work, well, treat them like an uncleaned Gentile (non-Jew) and a despicable tax collector. Actually, Jesus doesn’t use those characterizations, but his fellow Judeans would have. For them the

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implication would have been to cast this offender out from the community, cut off from society.

Except that just before this passage he has the parable of leaving the 99 good sheep and going to search for the one that went astray. And in the passage following today's Peter asks how many times to forgive and Jesus essentially says “a million times”.

Thus, in this context to treat the offender as a non-Jew or tax collector doesn't mean treat them as an outsider, as one of “them.” It means have compassion and try again another day.

Then Jesus tells them, “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Again, this is in the context of reconciliation. That is, what you hold on to you will be held on to in heaven. And, conversely, whatever you let go of, in relation to the offenses that other people bring against you, then it's gone; it's let go in heaven.

The point isn't the binding; it's the loosing, the letting go. If the two people in conflict can't resolve their differences, then that is a loss. For the powers of the kingdom of heaven, are always being directed toward letting go, toward forgiveness.

Thus, if two can agree on to reconcile and ask God for help then God will do it for them.

And, by consequence, Jesus will be among those seeking reconciliation in his name. Jesus is saying, “I'm there. I'm with you. You've got me. You're not alone.” The spirit of Jesus is involved in conflicts and is always seeking ways to bring people together.

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The declaration of the real presence of Jesus “where two or three are gathered” in his name, is the heart and soul of Matthew — both chapter 18 and the book as a whole.

The point of all of Matthew 18 is not that the church or its leaders possess special authority or insight when dealing with disputes, but that whenever it does exercise authority, it must pay ceaseless attention to the least powerful members of the community.

Matthew 18 describes the foundational values and practices that distinguish the community of disciples from any other: solidarity with one another as “children” (Matthew 18:1-5), avoidance of actions that cause others to “stumble” (18:6-9), care for the most vulnerable (18:6, 10, 14), restoration of those who go astray (18:12-14, 15-17), and forgiveness without limit (18:21-35).

In the pursuit of this vision and these practices, the community embodies and represents the empire of heaven on earth (18:18-19) and Jesus himself is present among them (18:20). The process described in 18:15-17 is a concrete example of a careful, orderly, and, most important, persistent means of dealing with kinds of interpersonal conflicts that lead to “binding and loosing” (18:18-19).

The process Jesus describes resembles, and has been a foundation for, modern practices associated with “restorative justice,” which focus less on punishment and more on the restoration of dignity and wholeness for both the conflicted parties and their communities.

But all of this is just an example of what Paul writes in today’s epistle lesson from Romans 13:8-14. As he says in verse 8, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” And in verse 9 that the commandments

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“are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

In other words, both the oppressed and the oppressor owe each other a different love, one that leads to a restoration of genuine relationships.

While hate and oppression dehumanize others, love, if well done and exercised, will give birth to a new world order, one in which healthy love can be nursed, grow, and flourish.

The global church has both an evangelical and missional task. That task is for humanity to see ourselves in each other’s face. Indeed, to love is to preach the gospel, because the heart of the gospel is found in our love of the other. That is what binds us together.

As verse 14 says, “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” In Greek the verb describes putting on clothes. Thus, in this context, to put on Christ is to imitate him in loving one’s neighbor through self-sacrificial service.

The future is not a choice between keeping your head down and quietly paying your taxes and other civic obligations on the one hand, and carousing and quarreling on the other. For those clothed with Christ, the future is characterized by seeing the “other” as neighbor and seeking the neighbor’s best. Love has the power to build a community and to transform people’s lives in ways as Jesus calls us to do.

As that familiar hymn proclaims,

Blest be the tie that binds, Our hearts in Christian love:

The fellowship of kindred minds, Is like to that above.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Creator, Savior, and Sustainer. Amen.